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Psychosocial Challenges In the Midst of the Coronavirus

By: Honey Oberoi Vahali

While trying to maintain our psychological equilibrium during a pandemic, we may well do so in a manner that facilitates the emergence of authoritarianism. But there can be hope too if we allow ourselves to be touched by an awareness of our vulnerabilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have bio-psychosocial, economic and political consequences, little of which we are able to fully cognize, leave alone respond to effectively. It is unlikely that any aspect of our lives will be left unaffected for long after the actual medical concerns posed by the virus are over. Media representations and news of the growing number of infections and deaths are invading and entrapping our minds. This essay outlines a few psychosocial challenges of this historical moment and their possible translation into long-term issues.

Every crisis carries the possibility of reactivating older issues with a new energy. Whenever humankind has been confronted with the outbreak of contagious diseases and epidemics, states and societies, have—with some exceptions—responded by blaming, shaming, shunning, humiliating, and practicing untouchability against patients. The disease becomes a marker of identity enveloping the individual, family, and the extended community within its folds. This has been true in the case of leprosy, plague, tuberculosis, AIDS, and even for mental illnesses where there is no evidence of any form of biological spread by contamination.

In all such instances, the suffering individual with a distinctive past disappears. Instead we have a stigmatising label that subsumes the entirety of the person's identity and existence. The ill person, who is seen to be a transmitter of disease and someone who can flood us with biological and/or psychological vulnerability, is cruelly ostracised and alienated. In all cases, the actual transmission of the illness is outweighed by a far greater intensity of anxieties.

The coronavirus grips us with fears of an impending catastrophe. It is very difficult to grapple with the fact that there are very few barriers to restrict the invisible virus' invasion of the human body. The long incubation period during which one can be an asymptomatic carrier and transmitter of the disease, transforms the virus into a power to reckon with in the real as well as psychological sense.

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The psychic fear is compounded by the fact that the asymptomatic transmitter of the coronavirus—unlike a person with leprosy or tuberculosis—carries very few external signs of the disease on their body. This can evoke powerful and intense anxieties of contagion from almost anyone and everyone.

Regressing from Covid

Explorations and insights into individual and group psychology tell us that the most basic dread of human beings is that of death and annihilation. This dread shadows us everywhere.

In ordinary contexts, we are able to 'defend' ourselves by repressing this dread or by using our psychic repertoire to consciously live our lives by distancing ourselves from a moment-to-moment awareness of our impending mortality. But the everyday maintenance of psychological equilibrium through defences such as repression and dissociation comes at its own cost.[1] This is compounded in situations where humans perceive a threat to their survival, such as the outbreak of an epidemic.

> [W]here our survival feels at stake, we may end up hating, externalising blame, succumbing to authority, and venting out our totalitarian instincts by joining authoritarian forces to find an enemy to exterminate.

In times such as these, the usual unconscious dynamics and means of protecting the personal or group self may be experienced as grossly inadequate. As the mind gets flooded with looming threats invoking annihilatory anxieties, a fusion of primitive unconscious aggressive and destructive forces in the individual with those in the social and collective psyche may take place. This coming together can then be exploited by the stated and unstated agendas of authoritarian and fascist states. The complex merger of psychic and hegemonic political drives can easily acquire a life of its own.

The crisis set off by the epidemic might end up becoming an occasion for the multiplication of structural injustice, mob violence, and harsher forms of discrimination. For, at the heart of the fear of contagion and of practices such as untouchability is the threat of being contaminated, invaded, or annihilated. In situations where our survival feels at stake, we may end up hating, externalising blame, succumbing to authority, and venting out our totalitarian instincts by joining authoritarian forces to find an enemy to exterminate.

In the grip of the coronavirus, we already seem to be giving way to strong regressive impulses. In Delhi and Mumbai there have been instances of spitting at and hurling abuse at people of the North Eastern states and their being denied access to shops. With the virus originating in China, people have been stigmatising the citizens of the North East for no reason other than their facial similarities with the Chinese. These instances of targeting the people of the North East are a part of a long history of them being mocked and slighted by mainland Indians.

Similarly, it is tragic to note how a biological calamity is being used in our country for purposes of consolidating hatred against Indian Muslims. There seems to be an active tendency and powerful need to shift blame for the spread of coronavirus in India onto Muslims. As the print, electronic, and digital media irresponsibly create psychological hype by repeatedly flashing provocative news and statements against Muslims, a fresh wave of anti-Muslim sentiments has been unleashed.

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The intensity with which hatred is being whipped against them reeks of a defensive agenda. Is it that by transferring blame onto them for the spread of the disease, we are trying to conveniently forget and wipe out from our collective conscience and memory, the manner in which carnage and large-scale destruction of property were unleashed on them? The divisive forces within our society are working up a fresh wave of Islamophobia, preparing a fresh ground through which future violence against them can be justified. One shudders to think of what lies ahead once the lockdown is over.

Beyond India too, there is news from other parts of the world, including America, of ways in which racism against blacks and Asians is on the rise. Instead of being a 'leveller', the pandemic is turning out to be a 'multiplier' of structural discrimination.

A split psyche

The insidious manner in which the invisible virus can survive on surfaces and within the human body is liable to bring us face to face with many other psychosocial challenges too. If every other surface and person is indeed a potential carrier, then we have to avoid almost everyone: those with travel histories, doctors, nurses and hospital staff, vegetable vendors, shopkeepers, sanitation workers, and domestic helpers. We must also avoid touching parts of our body, railings , door knobs, light switches, and so on. The list is endless indeed!

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While today precautionary habits of maintaining cleanliness are necessary, in times to come these same habits are likely to invoke an unwitting participation in heightened obsessive-compulsive practices , leading to a form of collective suspiciousness and paranoia. Before we know, we may end up rekindling untouchability with a renewed and aggressive ferocity. As the virus hits harder, our fears are possibly going to intermingle with the dread of contamination and be directed towards Dalits, the working classes, and economically marginalised people, the same groups who have been worst affected by the unplanned lockdown.

There lies a thin line between adhering to the mantra of physical distancing and its conversion into a powerful projective force of othering and discrimination against the most marginalised members of society. Blue collar workers, migrant workers, slum and street dwellers and all those existing on socio-economic peripheries are liable to be easily considered *the* agents spreading the virus.

> Processes of othering are intrinsic to human history. At different junctures they become the impetus to justify targeted hatred and violence.

We are already face to face with a telling psychic split as doctors, nurses and other hospital staff are being pushed out of their homes and localities by neighbours who fear being infected by frontline health workers. It is instructive to recognise the workings of the psyche here. On the one hand, medical professionals are being applauded for their work and are being looked upon as gods. They are also the ones from whom we seek care and on whom we will be fully dependent if we or our family members contract the virus. On the other hand, they are treated as the 'untouchable other' or the 'contaminating agent' and are being evicted. This is a clear instance of how survival is maintained, by denying and splitting off complex aspects of an all-pervasive, multidimensional threatening reality.

Processes of othering are intrinsic to human history. At different junctures they become the impetus to justify targeted hatred and violence. The usual unconscious psychological defences deployed by humans in creating an 'other' include dissociation, projection, projective identification, and the deployment of paranoid-schizoid defense[2]. These might constitute the bedrock on which prejudice, stereotyping, scapegoating, and the splitting up the world into good and bad thrive. Such splitting may ultimately give way to identifying supposed sources and embodiments of badness which can then be wiped up and eliminated by morally self-righteous forces and by collective aggression. In times of heighted stress, these may become our habitual ways of countering the full impact of any crisis that involves us as humans.

A flight towards authoritarianism

Adding to the complexity enumerated so far is also the deep seated propensity in humans to succumb to authoritarianism and authority figures. This is liable to be on the rise whenever we are faced with circumstances that challenge our sense of continuing existence.

Among several other works, a famous study by American social psychologist Stanley Milgran demonstrated that there exists a deep and unconscious trait in us to obey orders even when they go against our personal conscience and usual ethical considerations. During the Nuremberg trials, several perpetrators of Nazi violence justified their participation in killings as being innocent. They believed that they were killing others as this was part of acting in a dutiful, moral and 'pure' manner. Throughout human history, we have many examples of people going against their personal sense of ethics and fusing their identity with forms of totalitarian power couched in morally pure forms and demanding their unwavering allegiance.

> Long after the virus' actual biological force has disappeared, it can make us give in to subservience, surveillance, violence, hatred and the legitimacy of controlling structures and forces.

The Covid-19 epidemic, which is capable of arousing fears of total collapse, can become a trigger intensifying human tendencies to submit to fascism, hyper-masculine nationalism, and other forms of authoritarian regimes. We can see only too clearly how the present occasion will be used by undemocratic authoritarian regimes to their advantage by demanding from their citizens unquestioned submission under the garb of maintaining regulations and enforcing discipline so as to ensure and maintain safety. Large segments of society are most likely to align their 'inner' proclivities for fascism with 'outer' socio-political forces, and actively seek shelter in anti-democratic regimes.

Long after the virus' actual biological force has disappeared, it can make us give in to subservience, surveillance, violence, hatred and the legitimacy of controlling structures and forces. The recognition of the enormity of a situation and its multi-layered actuality demands a deep contact with our sources of insecurities and fears, without allowing them to take over our capacity for rational judgment.

The possibility of rejuvenation

The thousands of Covid-19 related deaths taking place every day is a tragedy gripping the entirety of humankind. Painful as this is, the moment promises an authentic encounter with what it means to be a mortal human being. It is thus crucial at this juncture to resist giving into fundamental forces and instead retain an awareness of our destructive proclivities.

> [To] allow oneself to be touched by [another's pain] can, at times, make us uncomfortable with our tendency of giving blindly into unjust power and authoritarianism.

This awareness can redirect attention to the 'voice of our conscience'. Retaining a connection with this voice can make us resist the tendency to align with projections fuelling hatred and othering. It can also help us take accountability for our collective actions and/or complicit silence in exacerbating the myriad forms of discrimination.

Several studies in collective psychology show that individuals and groups who mourn loss and suffering, rather than give in to othering or finding an enemy to destroy, are more likely to work towards justice, self-renewal, and self-transformation (Erickson 1968, Vahali 2008). To be in awareness of the other's pain and to allow oneself to be touched by it can, at times, make us uncomfortable with our tendency of giving blindly into unjust power and authoritarianism.

There are important lessons to be learnt from this historical moment. Today we are starkly confronting the limits of our power (indeed all power) and claims to hasty development and greed-driven advancement. The moment presents us with recovering forgotten lessons about our reality as vulnerable, fragile, and impermanent embodied beings, forever existing under uncertain and unpredictable circumstances. It is hitting us hard. Our belief in the omnipotence of science, technology, and the state; our desire to capture and subjugate other humans, animals, and nature; and to create a world of endless needs and consumable desires, all are so easily shaken—by a microscopic virus.

> The awareness of impending death can change us deeply. Perhaps a transformation awaits us here.

In recognising the limits of power and in expanding our emotional life to be touched by the suffering around and inside the self, we can reach a different appreciation of mutual interdependence and a healthy acknowledgement of the fragile nature of our existence. The awareness of impending death can change us deeply. Perhaps a transformation awaits us here. This might make us capable of reaching out with empathy instead of by giving in to the instinct of aggressing against and hating those who are vulnerable or affected. In small quarters of the world this is already happening.

In this essay we have remained preoccupied with the darker shades of the psychological challenges confronting us, it would take us an equal amount of effort to document and expand on the innumerable compassionate actions, sacrifices of health workers and civil society initiatives across the world to feed, offer shelter and save others from Covid-19.

In this sobering time, the virus is indeed beholding a possibility that can make us reflectively pause as a species. However, it all depends on whether we will let the ongoing crisis touch us authentically or will we once again lose the opportunity and meet it with our usual defensive rigidity.

Footnotes:

1 Repression is a basic psychological defence mechanism by way of which the human psyche pushes out of consciousness unbearable feelings, experiences and memories. That which is pushed outside the realm of awareness, nonetheless continues to exist in the unconscious mind, also exert pressure as an active force, propelling our actions and life choices.   Dissociation is a psychological defence of reducing or making bearable the impact of traumatic, extremely uncomfortable or painful realities by denying, minimizing, disconnecting feelings from thoughts and/or making them unknowable to the self through a number of ways. One type of dissociation is depersonalisation: the feeling that one is not in one's body and is disconnected from one's sense of self. Another type of dissociation is derealisation: the world and environment feel unreal to the individual.

2 Projection is an unconscious process through which we disown the negative and unacceptable parts of personal or group self/identity and then attribute the same to the 'other'. For instance by disowning propensities for violence and hatred in the 'majoritarian Hindu consciousness', Muslims are looked at as 'terrorists' and 'repositories of all kinds of badness'. Or for instance, in the European and American racial context, Blacks and Jews have had to bear the burden of the disavowed violence, greed, sexuality, and criminality of the White people/consciousness. In projective identification, we retain an emotional connection with the disavowed part and by the force of our feelings and/or actions 'unconsciously force' the 'other' to embody and enact the negative projections which have been thrown at them. The paranoid-schizoid defence is a basic primitive unconscious defence against self-annihilation in which inner sources of insecurity and hatred are projected on to external individuals or groups. Those on the receiving end are then looked at with suspicion and attacks against them are considered appropriate and justified.

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